DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 355 534 CS 213 738

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TITLE The Organic Literary Canon: Its Role in American English Education.
PUB DATE Nov 92
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (82nd, Louisville, KY, November 18-23, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College English; *English Curriculum; English Instruction; *English Teacher Education; Higher Education; Literary Criticism; *Literature Appreciation; National Surveys
IDENTIFIERS Educational Issues; *Literary Canon; Literary Theory

ABSTRACT

The vigorous public debate over the definition and function of the literary canon has raised certain important questions for English educators. One of the chief among all questions is how the literary canon debate has affected the content of English methods courses. The word "canon" has long been associated with a static and dogmatic connotation, but a better way of conceiving of the term is to instill it with a more organic character which constantly expands to include new works. It is acceptable to open the canon to works heretofore unknown or little discussed. A recent study looked at how the canon is faring in English Education courses at 20 colleges and universities in 11 states. Results indicate that aspects of the canon continue to be discussed, and the size of the current literary canon has expanded to include more works by women, minority, and non-western writers. However, despite the broadening of the canon, both current and past versions of the notion of canon suffer from a lack of moderation. A whole array of realms of knowing should be made available that transcends mere lines of race, ethnicity or gender. Teachers should experiment with a "dialectic of freedom" which encourages individuals to read intercultural works and develop new ways of knowing and learning. Such an objective should be a key to further expansion of the canon. (HB)

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Recently, numerous educators and critics of American culture have published works on the benefits as well as the constraints of literary canons. However, few of these writers have agreed upon what constitutes a canon, much less what particular works might constitute a literary canon that most American professors could agree upon.

After fifteen years of on-campus curricula debates along with attendant professional journal discussions of the role of Black literature, Women's literature and multi-ethnic/international literatures, Alan Bloom released his book The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students. In the same year, 1987, E. D. Hirsch offered his Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs To Know. These books catapulted the debate about canon from the campus into the public forum. Subsequently, educators, researchers, critics, politicians and the public articulated sharply divergent views on what selections belong in a literary canon, what beneficial or deleterious effects canons of certain descriptions might have upon American readers and college students in particular, and what role the study of canon or canons might assume in English Education programs.

The sometimes clarifying sometimes obfuscating salvos from all corners of this debate have raised certain important questions for English educators. These questions deserve attention here before I proceed to the core of my paper which attempts to describe the current status of canon studies in English Education.

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Among the central questions in this debate or dialogue are the following:

What is a canon?
Does an American literary canon exist?
Is a European canon sufficient?
Does each ethnic and/or minority group have its own canon?
What is the purpose of a canon?
Is there a maximum number of literary works that can be carried forward in the memory of new generations of readers?

Currently, these questions and others are being addressed from various perspectives, e.g. multi-cultural studies, minority studies, feminist studies, new historicism studies, liberal arts studies. From the perspective of English educators, another important question is: "How has the literary canon debate affected the content of English methods courses in the United States?"

In order to answer the latter question in detail, I will offer my own definition of canon and briefly outline my responses to the other questions. Derived from the original Greek root of "cane" or reed which may have been a measuring devise, the Latin "canon" came to mean a collection of sacred texts or a body of writing by one author. (cf.Robert Scholes' witty discussion in the November, 1991 College English.) "Canon" was long associated with the dogmatic offering of a central body of religious texts; however, for the purposes of this paper, I wish to strip the word of its static, dogmatic connotations and offer, instead, a more organic definition. The canon, then, is the expanding body of literary works that includes past and modern works which inculcate or represent as many of the central stories, ideas and wisdom of a pluralist society as may be agreed upon by its educators.

From this rather democratic definition of canon flow my responses to some of the aforementioned questions. For example,

I believe that an American literary canon does exist along with the Eurocentric canon which is not sufficient alone in our pluralist society. Likewise, I accept the notion that the original countries of all American ethnic and minority groups have canons which represent those pluralist societies whose greatest works deserve representation in the American curriculum. But now, you say, you have opened the door to hundreds of works little known or unknown to many educators. And I respond that this is acceptable. For we must balance our existing expertise drawn from previous teaching experience with our own desire to learn more about literary works by previously unheard voices. Furthermore, students have all of their elementary school, middleschool, secondary school and college days to receive a fair share of this wide ranging canon.

Yet another objection to my description can be raised by those familiar with the findings of Gunnar Hannson. Professor Hansson observed at the NCTE National Conference in 1991 that canons cannot include an infinite number of works. Indeed, his study of Swedish readers suggests that about 230 canonical literary works might be carried forward in the nation's memory. as "successive generations of varied readers" turnover old works and add new ones. However, this is not a major roadblock to my argument because, practically speaking, no one teacher is expected to keep the entire canon alive. This is a task which the English teaching profession can effectively accomplish in concert even with respect to an expanding, organic canon of the kind that I have described.

With my description of the canon in mind, I invite you to consider the results of my recent study of how the canon is faring in English Education courses at twenty colleges and universities in eleven different states. I surveyed colleges and universities in the states of California, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Texas, and Virginia as well as the District of Columbia, Washington D.C. between April and November of 1992. Both undergraduate and graduate programs are represented.

Two conclusions emerge from my survey. First, the works of the literary conon as described in 1980 terms continue to be discussed in English Education courses. In the few schools where there has been some decrease in the discussion of canon works more work is being done on writing. Second, at all colleges and universities surveyed the size of the current literary canon has expanded to include more works by women writers, more works by minority group writers such as Black and Native American authors, and more works by authors from hitherto unrepresented non-Western countries.

For example, Patricia Kelly reports that at Virginia Tech works of women authors and those of American minority groups have "increased dramatically," a trend obeservable at the College of William and Mary as well as at the University of Maryland. In addition, at Southern Illinois University, Bruce Appleby has changed a "Literature for the Adolescent" course to "Young Adult Literature in a Multi-Cultural Society." Students at Mount Saint Mary College complete a course in "Nonwestern Culture." Furthermore, Mark Gulesian at the College of William and Mary believes

that the English Education professors are showing the way to the future for pre-service English teachers. "Much more discussion of how to deliver a broader literary canon" occurs in his classes than is "justified by the continued narrowness of the curriculum delivered in the secondary school classroom." And this is appropriate because new English teachers will need to respond to a changing, organic canon at their schools.

Hence, canon expansion appears to be alive and healthy at the colleges and universities featured in this study. Nevertheless, more work needs to be done. John Pfordresher notes that scepticism about a "standard literary canon" has released a rush to teach more world literature with more representation from previously economically and socially silent classes as "cultural criticism" gains momentum. However, he regrets that some graduates of schools of education are not adequately prepared to teach literature. He claims that some are, "Foggy about the nature of the experience of literature as literature and lacking a strong background." Similarly, Faith Z. Schullstrom in Expanding The Canon, a 1990 NCTE publication, calls for more works by African Americans, Native Americans, women, and non-Westerners in order to broaden the cultural experiences of students and teachers.

Finally, I ask you to indulge some educational philosophizing on my part. Both the rigid canon descriptions of the past and some current, limited, "critically correct," and "politically correct" descriptions of the canon suffer from a lack of moderation. Unfortunately, educators practicing these views create a false center for themselves, as Robert Bone has observed. Personally, I prefer Philip Phenix's idea that a comprehensive rather than a limited or atomized approach is desireable in education to counter the fragmentation, destructive skepticism, and

depersonalization brought on by specialization in the modern world. According to Phenix a whole array of realms of meaning or ways of knowing should be made available and taught where it is unknown to the reader. Thus, to the current canon selections others should be added to increase our aesthetic appreciation of writings from cultures which deserve to be integrated into the American consciousness. By widening choices rather than limiting readers to a false center we can nurture "the growth of the mysterious and wonderful powers that belong to every human being." And we can put into perspective the "exaggerated claims made for partial ways of knowing."

Likewise, Maxine Greene, a multi-dimensional genius in matters of educational philosophy with whom I have studied, invites each person in the learning enterprise to participate in the "dialectic of freedom" which encourages individuals to read inter-cultural works and use texts from many cultures in ways that release them to create meanings of their own at the moment that the text and the knower are co-present. In this way and in this vision of knowing the reader experiences empowering freedoms in which the reader and the text modify and shape each other. Thus, she reminds us that we can take or learn to take a variety of perspectives on the world. "Still the perspectives available are always partial."

As a result, we as instructors must not encourage limited visions generated by false centers. Instead, as Green suggests,we should create a ground for "multiplex and endless challenging, as each person reaches out from her/his own ground toward what might be, should be, is not yet." An organic canon, as I have described it, can provide provide this ground . Such a canon could include vivid expressions of the interconnectivity of all human cultures and provide teachers with the power to create meanings that are

not yet but someday will be. To paraphrase Henry David Thoreau, "Who can say what prospect life or literature offers to another?"

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